NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6275 NOVEMBER 24, 1978
DOUGLAS ROBERTS/WADI NATRUN

JOHN THE BAPTIST

ANNCR:

THE COPTIC CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF EGYPT HAS COMMISSIONED FURTHER SCIENTIFIC STUDIES TO DETERMINE WHETHER HUMAN BONES UNCOVERED AT A DESERT MONASTERY WEST OF CAIRO ARE THE REMAINS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, THE JEWISH PROPHET WHO IS SAID TO HAVE BAPTIZED JESUS CHRIST. DOUGLAS ROBERTS FROM THE DISCOVERY SITE IN WADI NATRUN.

VOICE:

AROUND EIGHTY BEARDED AND BLACK ROBED MONKS LIVE BEHIND THE HIGH WALLS OF THIS DESERT MONASTERY FOUNDED BY SAINT MAKARIOS SOME SIXTEEN HUNDRED YEARS AGO. THE FORTRESS-LIKE MONASTERY DOMINATES THE SURROUNDING DESERT. THE MONKS GROW VEGETABLES, INCLUDING EXCEPTIONALLY LARGE TURNIPS, AND RAISE CHICKENS AND GOATS. WATER COMES FROM UNDERGOUND WELLS. EACH YEAR THE MONKS CELEBRATE A TRADITIONAL FEAST IN HONOR OF THE DAY WHEN THE REMAINS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST WERE SUPPOSEDLY BROUGHT HERE, ACCORDING TO LEGEND AND MANUSCRIPTS KEPT AT THE MONASTERY.

THE MAN WHO BAPTIZED JESUS CHRIST WAS BEHEADED IN PALESTINE ON THE ORDERS OF KING HEROD SOME TIME BEFORE CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION. HIS FOLLOWERS SPIRITED HIS REMAINS OUT OF PALESTINE. HIS HEAD WAS SUPPOSEDLY BURIED IN NORTHERN SYRIA AND THE BODY TAKEN TO ALEXANDRIA. MANUSCRIPTS KEPT HERE SAY IT WAS TRANSPORTED TO THE MONASTERY AND BURIED UNDER THE CHURCH OF SAINT MAKARIOS IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY. NINE YEARS AGO WORKMEN BEGAN EXTENSIVE RENOVATION WORK ON THE MONASTERY AND IN NINETEEN SEVENTY SIX THEY UNCOVERED A TOMB CONTAINING NUMEROUS HUMAN SKELETONS UNDERNEATH THE ANCIENT CHURCH. THERE, SAY THE MONKS, WERE THE REMAINS

OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

AT THE MONASTERY FATHER YACOUB SAID CHURCH MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE ELEVENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES PINPOINT JOHN'S BURIAL PLACE EXACTLY WHERE THE TOMB WAS UNCOVERED. AND WHILE COPTIC POPE SHENUDA THE THIRD SAYS FURTHER STUDY IS NEEDED TO VERIFY THE DISCOVERY MOST OF THE MONKS HERE SEEM CONVINCED ALREADY THAT THEY ARE IN FACT THE GUARDIANS OF THE REMAINS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

THE DISCOVERY WAS KEPT SECRET FOR TWO YEARS, APPARENTLY TO GIVE WORKMEN TIME TO COMPLETE THE RENOVATION IN ANTICIPATION OF A LARGE INFLUX OF VISITORS. BUT THEN LAST WEEK WORD LEAKED OUT TO THE CAIRO NEWSPAPER AL AHRAM AND AS FATHER YACOUB ACKNOWLEDGED WITH A WAN SMILE, THE PEACEFUL LIFE OF THE MONASTERY HAS CHANGED CONSIDERABLY SINCE THEN. ONE RECENT VISITOR COUNTED THREE DOZEN CAR AND BUS LOADS OF PILGRIMS IN A SINGLE MORNING. FATHER YACOUB SAYS THOUSANDS ARE COMING TO THIS ISOLATED SPOT EACH DAY, COMPARED TO A FEW HUNDRED A WEEK BEFORE THE AL AHRAM REPORT WAS PUBLISHED. (OPT) THE DORMITORY, GUEST HOUSE AND OTHER BUILDINGS INSIDE THE WALLS OF THE MONASTERY ARE SURPRISINGLY MODERN. THE SMALL CHURCH WITH ITS THREE HIGH-DOMED SANCTUARIES HAS BEEN COMPLETELY REFURBISHED, THE STONE FLOOR COVERED WITH YELLOW CARPET. (END OPT)

BAREFOOT PILGRIMS ARE ALLOWED INSIDE FOR A BRIEF LOOK AT THE TOMB WHERE THE BONES WERE FOUND. IT LIES BENEATH A NEWLY-MADE WOODEN TRAP DOOR. UNDERNEATH IS A SMALL STONE CAVITY WITH A DIRT FLOOR NOW ILLUMINATED BY AN ELECTRIC LIGHT TRIGGERED BY OPENING THE TRAP DOOR. THE RELICS HAVE BEEN MOVED INTO ONE OF THE SANCTUARIES WHERE ELEVENTH CENTURY FRESCOES DEPICTING CHRIST AND HIS APOSTLES INCLUDING JOHN ADORN THE WALLS.

FATHER YACOUB OPENED THE LARGE WOODEN CHEST IN ONE CORNER OF THE SANCTUARY REVEALING A JUMBLED PILE OF LARGELY UNRECOGNIZABLE HUMAN BONES WRAPPED IN A RED CLOTH. REPORTS PUBLISHED HERE SAY FOURTEEN HUMAN SKELETONS WERE FOUND IN THE TOMB -- INCLUDING ONE WITHOUT A HEAD, PRESUMABLY THE REMAINS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

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